

# ‘Our Baka brothers obviously do not speak French’: Siting and scaling physical/discursive ‘movements’ in post-colonial Belgium

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## Abstract

This paper argues that a space-sensitive sociolinguistics can instruct contemporary anthropological approaches to globalisation how to more radically consider place and scale constructs as products and processes of social and discursive action. The case considered here is the month-long protest of African associations against an exhibition of Baka ‘Pygmies’ from Cameroon in a natural heritage site in Belgium. This case is subsequently dealt with in a ‘multi-sited’ and a ‘scale sensitive’ ethnographic description. The paper concludes that an alternative analytics of diaspora and globalisation needs to bring down the siting and scaling that occurs in ‘glocalities’ to their fragmented materiality.

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‘In contrast to the abstract globe conjured by social science globalism, the scholarship I am imagining would stress the concreteness of ‘movements’ in both senses of the word: social mobilisations in which new identities and interests are formed, and travels from one place to another through which

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place-transcending interactions occur. These two senses of movement work together in remaking geographies and scales’.  
(Tsing, 2000, p. 350)

## 1. Space on the agenda

The challenge formulated by the position paper of this special issue is a quite formidable one. ‘Our concern with space’, Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (this issue; *italics in original*) claim, ‘is part of an attempt to come to terms with globalisation and diaspora *as features of sociolinguistic analysis*’. In this manner, the authors situate their endeavour among the many others that explore the epistemological and methodological implications of globalisation for the social sciences. In this paper I am mainly concerned with the question of what a space-sensitive sociolinguistics proposed by the authors (see also Blommaert, 2005, pp. 221–224) has to offer to the insights already generated in the social sciences, more particularly in an increasingly space-oriented anthropology (see Corsín Jiménez, 2003)? The general answer provided in this paper is that, with the help of sociolinguistics, anthropology may more radically consider place, space, and scale as social and discursive constructs.

In contemporary anthropological approaches to globalisation one can discern two major currents. The first approach thematises the idea of circulation – as flows impeded by or transgressing boundaries – and describes (unequal) exchanges between sites of different status, for instance conceptualised in terms of centre and periphery. This ‘multi-sited’ approach can be distinguished from a more scale-sensitive line of research which focuses on processes of ‘glocalisation’, and describes locales as heterogeneous, multiscalar spaces within which processes of demarcation and connection take place.<sup>1</sup> In all, both currents share a focus on ‘space’, based on a keen awareness that globalisation involves the ongoing spatial (re)organisation of the circulation of capital, labour, people, texts, images, etc. Such repartitions of space entail continuous struggles over place and position (Swyngedouw, 1992, pp. 429; Massey, 1999, pp. 21–22). In the case presented here, I try to combine this general focus with a specific interest in how space and scale are discursively constructed, in order to say something about the ‘politics of space’ in which ‘glocal’ actors increasingly engage (Alonso, 1994; Escobar, 2001). To that end, I conduct both a ‘multi-sited’ and a ‘scale sensitive’ analysis of the same event, and hope to show that both approaches

<sup>1</sup> In speaking of ‘approaches’ or ‘currents’, I try to avoid classifying ethnographies as unambiguously either ‘multi-sited’ or ‘scale sensitive’. Most contemporary ethnographies combine elements of both. To some extent, these two approaches coincide, respectively, with a view of space as ‘a given, irreducible ontological category’ and an alternative view in which space is ‘but a becoming, an emerging property of social relationships’ (Corsín Jiménez, 2003, p. 140). Again, I think the distinction is not as clear-cut as Corsín Jiménez makes it appear but boils down to questions of the ethnographer’s positioning (‘above’ versus ‘below’) and the subject’s agency (‘system’ versus ‘lifeworld’).

bring out relevant aspects of the case and contribute, each in their own way, to a more robust critique of globalisation.

## 2. Multiple and multiscalar sites

‘Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations’ (Marcus, 1995, pp. 105)

In order to grasp the (world) system and (local) ‘lifeworlds’ in one integrated ethnographic programme, Marcus introduces a ‘multi-sited ethnography’ which, as the above quote indicates, is principally interested in the physical mobility of people, things, and texts. This focus on circulation and trajectories between locales can be said to coincide with taking ‘places’ for granted by attributing to them a relative stability over time and a large degree of internal coherence which, according to Gille (2001, p. 326) ‘leaves no room for accounting for the production and transformation of sites’. More specifically, in her critique of Marcus, Gille (2001) tries to bring out the dynamics of multiple place-making *from below* that goes on in a singular site. This alternative view, which takes its lead from ‘global ethnography’ (Burawoy, 2000, 2001) rather sees sites as temporary and contested fixes and as internally heterogeneous in the sense of being ‘multiscalar’ (Gille and Ó Riain, 2002, p. 286).

While multi-sited ethnography in its stress on transfers and travel could be seen as a tributary to World Systems Analysis (Wallerstein, 2000), Gille’s version of ‘global ethnography’ is also inspired by the more recent critique of WSA stemming from cultural and political geography which, because of its focus on ‘glocalisation’ and ‘scaling’, is sometimes referred to as the ‘re-scaling literature’ (Uitermark, 2002). Introduced in the late 1980s, the concept of ‘glocalisation’ tries to grasp the gradual post-Fordist breakdown of the nation-state and its contested restructuring ‘both upwards to supra-national or global levels and downwards to the scale of the individual body, the local, urban, or regional configurations’ (Nielsen and Simonsen, 2003, p. 914). More generally, now, ‘glocalisation’ serves to express the mutual embeddedness of the local and the global (and all the intermediate levels) – something which the re-scaling literature tries to grasp by characterising scales as ‘nested’, that is relational, dialectical and ‘simultaneous’ (Howitt, 2000, p. 8).

A multi-sited approach – in my definition – looks at scales as hierarchical levels of size, reach and power, sees borders not so much as zones of transgression but as ruptures (Lugo, 2000), and considers places as firmly positioned in a global system of differential ‘status’ (Ferguson, 2002, p. 19). While trying to grasp how people in the periphery have abandoned all their hopes of world-wide development and have chosen the option to physically ‘egress’ to prosperous places rather than to await ‘progress’ in their disadvantaged locale, Ferguson (2002, p. 22) contends:

‘... if escape, too, is blocked, other avenues may involve violently crashing the gates of the “first class”, smashing the bricked walls and breaking through, if only temporarily, to the “other side” of privilege and plenty’.

In contrast, the rescaling literature does not regard scales as fitting within ‘a pre-ordained hierarchical framework for ordering the world’ (Marston, 2000, p. 220) but takes a more constructionist stance in which scales are seen as socially constructed and politically motivated *from below* and as offering ‘possibilities for social groups to create their own politics of scale’ (Marston, 2000, p. 232) in order to resist the kind of capital-centred scale constructions which Ferguson so forcefully evokes.

Both in the multi-sited and the scale-sensitive ethnographies, one can discern an emerging interest in aspects of discourse, although this is largely limited to (a) how the global hierarchy of places and connections are imagined or articulated in local/global terms (e.g., Ferguson, 2002), or (b) how the global media disseminate ideologies and identities, or inversely, how people opt out (up-scale) of their local predicament by using media of more global reach and power (Appadurai, 1996; Adams, 1996; Delaney and Leitner, 1997). In this paper I intend to push this a little further by demonstrating that spaces, places and scales are social and discursive constructs which are constantly renegotiated and redefined by actors in particular settings. I argue that both multi-sited and scale-sensitive ethnographies may profit considerably from such a stance.

### 3. The Baka affair

In the summer of 2002 widespread protest erupted about an exhibition on ‘Baka Pygmies’ organised in a natural park, *Domaine de Champalle*, in the village of Yvoir.<sup>2</sup> Located in the Walloon countryside of Belgium, *Champalle* is a vast natural heritage site in the picturesque valley of the river Meuse at the foot of a wooded plateau. The section of the park closest to the woods is called ‘The Rainforest’ and consists of a former farmstead and an adjacent grassland both of which have been transformed into exhibition sites over the last decade. The 2002 Baka exhibition was intended to raise money for the Baka people of Cameroon, eight of whom, together with two spokespersons, had come over to stay at the park for the duration of the humanitarian show. The exhibition tried to attract the public interest by, among other things, presenting scenes of alleged typical Baka activities represented by mannequins in a greenhouse, by showing eight Baka traditional huts laid out in the grass field, and by offering regular dance performances staged by the eight Baka visitors in the courtyard of the former farmhouse.

<sup>2</sup> The Baka affair was widely reported and debated across Europe and Africa. Outside Belgium and Cameroon – where at least 50 articles on the matter were published in newspaper and periodicals – notices and newspaper articles were published by, among others, Reuters, CNN, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *De Volkskrant*. All major international radio stations (RFI, BBC World, and Deutsche Welle), and some television channels (RTI, Netwerk-Holland) also reported the matter.

Four weeks after the exhibition was opened to the public in early July 2002, a highly mediated protest campaign was launched and sustained by Africans living in Belgium. Overall, the protest unfolded in two episodes in which two different organisations of Belgian Africans successively played a central role. The ‘Movement of New Migrants’ (*Mouvement des Nouveaux Migrants*, MNM) based in Liège, launched the protest by denouncing the exhibition as ‘colonial’ and ‘exploitative’. In line with the general objectives of the MNM to secure full citizenship for immigrants in Belgium, the organisation demanded the immediate closure of the exhibition, for the reason that it was in breach of human rights.<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks later, an ad hoc organisation, Collective for the Defence of the Baka (*Collectif pour la Défense des Bakas*, hereafter, the ‘Collective’), was created in Brussels, and took over the initiative in the protest. Taking a more Afrocentrist stance, the Collective denounced the humiliation of the Baka visitors. In order to restore their dignity, the Collective did not merely demand the ‘liberation’ of the Baka from ‘The Rainforest’; it also took on the task of finding alternative ways to raise money. The Collective first formulated these considerations and goals during a public meeting in Brussels on 10th August attended by, among many others, two of the Baka visitors from Yvoir as well as their Cameroonian spokesperson. The condensed quote mentioned in the title of this paper draws from this eventful meeting. It came at the point where the President of the Collective was about to invite the audience to ask questions directly to the two Baka guests. This sentence about the alleged linguistic incompetence of the Baka was one of the elements in a performance that dramatised and ultimately restricted the public *prise de parole* of the Baka. Two weeks after this high-profile public meeting, the Baka affair came to an end when the Embassy of Cameroon in Belgium, in accord with the Belgian government, took control over the fate of the eight Baka and their male spokesperson and repatriated them on the 24th August 2002.<sup>4</sup>

In general, the quote from the public meeting is meant to indicate how the Baka were never able really to surmount their subaltern status, so as explain their mission or attain their goals, neither when they were in contact with the Belgian tourists at Yvoir, nor when they were being empowered by fellow Africans to face the international community. This deadlock of subalternity and the way the shifting allies of the Baka helped to accomplish it, is the general observation from which my ethnographic analysis sets out. Rather than remedy or overstate this predicament, I intend to describe the finer discursive space-making and scale-making operations that took place at critical moments during the affair. My purpose is to show the extent to

<sup>3</sup> The concept of ‘new migrants’ is used in migration studies in order to refer to the ‘second generation’ of migrants entering Belgium since the late 1980s from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa. This follows an earlier period (beginning after WWII) of a more or less organised influx of (a) tens of thousands of guest workers from Southern Europe, Turkey, and Northern Africa, and (b) a far more restricted group of several thousand Africans – mainly Congolese – students, political dissidents, and entrepreneurs (Martiniello and Kagné, 1999, pp. 88–90, p. 104; Kagné and Martiniello, 2001, p. 7).

<sup>4</sup> The female spokesperson remained in Belgium and has since become a close collaborator of Louis Raets, the manager of the natural park.

which the domination of the Baka was a fragile construction throughout. Its outcomes were far more uncertain than the above account leads us to believe.

#### 4. Sites and transfers

A multi-sited ethnographic description of the affair can distinguish between two successive moves made by the Baka guests in the company of – and, to some extent, led by – distinct and opposed groups. The first movement led the Baka from the Cameroon rainforest to the Yvoir ‘Rainforest’ – a relocation which was arranged by Louis Raets, manager of the natural park at Yvoir, and his collaborators.<sup>5</sup> This move was relatively unsuccessful in that the exhibition attracted mainly negative reactions instead of a minimal number of visitors.<sup>6</sup> This negative response was largely elicited in the course of a second ‘movement’ which consisted in repositioning the Baka from the natural park into the centre of (inter)national attention of the media and other actors. This relocation was set in motion and sustained by organisations of Africans in Belgium, and culminated into the much-advertised trip of a Baka delegation from Yvoir to Brussels. From the point of view of the protesters, this ‘movement’ was relatively successful in that they succeeded in getting their message across (problematizing the exhibition) to a wide audience, including the (inter)national media, the Belgian and Cameroon governments, and several relevant organisations.

When one tries to grasp the relative success of the two ‘movements’ – as leading ‘somewhere’ or ‘nowhere’ – the analytical concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ are of some use. However, by looking into the finer constructions of place and scale that constitute the Baka affair, one realises that ‘places’ are never unproblematically central or peripheral (or semi-peripheral, for that matter) but that such are contested constructs. To a large extent, the Baka affair is a matter of what one actor (e.g. The Rainforest) constructs as ‘centre’ for the Baka, another actor (i.e., the Belgian Africans) tries to redefine as ‘periphery’, while suggesting an alternative ‘centre’ into which the Baka could thrive.

To begin with the Rainforest organisers, they construct the trip of the Baka to Yvoir as a move from periphery to centre in relation to two different groups of significant others: (a) their fellow actors in the field of tourism, and (b) the park’s visitors as distinct from the Baka guests. In relation to the national and regional ‘tourist-scape’, the 2002 show at Yvoir may be seen as one in a series of attempts to transform the *Domaine* into a more comprehensive and attractive tourist resort. Over the last 10 years the *Domaine* has been losing its erstwhile status as one of

<sup>5</sup> In actual fact, the Baka exhibition was a ‘joint venture’ of two organisations: (a) the humanitarian organisation *Association pour la promotion des actions humanitaires au Cameroun* (APAHC) which was created at the instigation of Louis Raets and was led by the two people – Roger Zé Owono and Marie Allem – who acted as spokespersons of the Baka in Yvoir; and (b) *Oasis Nature*, a non-profit organisation that runs the *Domaine* and is led, almost single-handedly, by Louis Raets.

<sup>6</sup> Two days before the exhibition closed, the newspaper *La Libre Belgique* (22/08/2002) reported that the show only attracted 3500 visitors while 20,000 had been expected.

the premier natural heritage sites in the region and it has been facing a constant decline in visitors and revenue. In order to reverse this trend, it set up 'The Rainforest' in an attempt to reach new publics by supplementing its natural history exhibits with displays of material culture (African art and artefacts), with audio-visual presentations of different indigenous peoples from tropical regions (e.g., Borneo and Brazil), and, ultimately in 2002, with a charity show. This broadening of the scope of the *Domaine* bears witness of large-scale developments in which the natural, the cultural, and the human/humanitarian are combined into an emerging form of 'total tourist attraction'. In Belgium several such hybrid spectacles were set up over the last years (e.g., at the theme parks of Walibi and Planckendael). One of the most spectacular among these was a Maasai show in 2000–2001 at the 'Han Caves', a natural heritage site not far from Yvoir. This popular multimedia exhibition also included exchanges between the public and a small number of Maasai in residence, who raised money for the construction of a Maasai cultural centre in Kenya.<sup>7</sup> In all, the 2002 Baka project may be seen as an attempt by the Yvoir natural park to overcome its decade-long history of marginalisation and catch up with new developments in tourism which experiment with novel formats that proved to be successful in neighbouring tourist sites.

In relation to its public and to the Baka, the *Domaine* presents itself as a 'central' or 'global' space of cultural tourism and discovery of the unknown. On its website, the park invites its visitors, among other things:

'... to fly over the life of the inhabitants of Borneo, [...] to plunge into the material culture of Africa, [...] to get a glimpse of the last tropical forests, [...] to traverse the large diorama of tropical plants, [and] to discover the world of tropical animals...'

Such a presentation attributes to the park's visitors a high degree of mobility which enables them to occupy 'more space' and undertake 'new adventures' (Bau-man, 2001, pp. 30–31). The 'centre' space it offers to its public stretches from within the confines of the park out into the most hidden corners of the globe. In the 2002 update of the park's website, the Baka exhibition is advertised in the same rhetoric of discovery, with statements such as '*for the first time* [Pygmies] have come from Cameroon to our country' (italics mine). In other publicity statements in which the charity status of the show is foregrounded, the stress is less on the aspired central position which the Baka occupy in the park than it is on the peripheral position of the Baka in their original setting. Thus, the Baka are not so much 'unfamiliar' as 'underprivileged'. Under the header 'You have everything, They have nothing', the folder which visitors receive upon entering the park, explains that: 'The Pygmies are at Yvoir: they

<sup>7</sup> Apart from a book published for the occasion (Van Der Stappen, 2002) there are hardly any traces of the event. At the time, the Maasai show at Han-sur-Lesse was advertised on the internet, not only by the park itself but also by regional tourist promoters (e.g., [http://www.tourismerochefort.be/han\\_an\\_expo.htm](http://www.tourismerochefort.be/han_an_expo.htm) (08/12/2002)).

have come to talk to you about their culture and their needs'. So, while the central position of the tourists is confirmed, the Baka are presented as poverty-stricken guests who visit the home of 'privilege and plenty'.

From a 'multi-sited' perspective, the controversy over the Baka exhibition at Yvoir can be summarised as a series of attempts to expose the fact that the way paved by the show's organisers is leading 'nowhere' or, at least, that it does not lead to the 'centre' of modern-day, lucrative and culture-edifying activity. The single most efficient term which the African protesters deploy to disclose the alleged 'actual' destination of the Baka charity show is 'human zoo'. The latter term refers to a historical, more precisely, a colonial format of displaying natives-in-context, that is, in a situation of confinement and (visual) exploitation, and it serves to most radically redefine the project as a peripheral one, both in time (outside 'the contemporary') and in space (outside 'the metropolitan centre').

Early on in the controversy, Joseph Anganda, the president of the MNM, declares to the regional newspaper *Vers l'Avenir* (29/07/2002) that: 'This [exhibition] is reminiscent of how black people were put on display in zoological gardens in 19th century Paris or at the World Exhibition in Belgium in 1958'. In the same newspaper Anganda likens the charity show at Yvoir with the project of colonisation in general, while explaining that both of them were conducted 'in the name of a self-professed civilizing and humanitarian mission' (*Vers l'Avenir*, 11/08/2002). In the course of the controversy, one can observe how other commentators capitalise on this historical reframing of the exhibition in order to characterise the project as conceived and articulated in an archaic fashion that is at variance with contemporary discourse. In the press coverage of the affair, one observes how the manager of the park is consistently located within the confines of 'his' natural park *alias* farmstead (where he also lives). He is presented in photographs wearing boots, lumberjack shirts or a green anorak, and is reported speaking in a rather blunt way about the protestors and in an upsettingly paternalist fashion about the Baka (*De Standaard*, 29/07/2002). Also, occasional references are made to the park's decaying and scarce infrastructure – a handful of ramshackle sheds and greenhouses – sustained, for instance, by visitors' comments that the park 'is getting worse every year' (*Le Vif/L'Express* 02/08/2002). Apart from popular remarks about the physical condition of the display, experts, anthropologists and other cultural experts can be heard describing the exhibition as amateurishly misconceived and ill formulated.

While all this results in qualifying the undertaking at Yvoir as colonial, rural or desperate, it is very efficient in marginalising the exhibition project as that of a churlish individual whose cultural project and humanitarian aspirations exceed the capacities of a modest natural park, and whose idiom is out of phase with the language repertoires of present-day multiculturalism ('respect', 'partnership', etc).

More than just 'dating' the Baka project, the key-metaphor of 'zoo humain' also serves to spell out the aspects of spatial confinement or lack of mobility of the Baka and at various points this is linked to accusations of exploitation and discrimination. Underlying the demand of the MNM to 'free the [Baka] hostages' (*Liberez les otages*) are a number of misgivings concerning the legal status of the Baka visitors: whether they have a proper labour contract and if not, whether they are not being exploited



and oppressed by the park's manager (*Le Soir*, 27–28 and 29/07/2002). To these suspicions, the 'Belgo-African League for the Re-establishment in Africa of Fundamental Liberties' (LIBERAL) in an internet communiqué (29/07/2002) denounces the 'objectification of human beings' (*chosification de l'Homme*) and 'the return to slavery' at Yvoir. Apart from foregrounding the outdatedness of the Baka show, MNM and LIBERAL also strongly suggest the continuing existence of 'neocolonial racism' (*Le Soir*, 10–11/08/2002) and stress the topicality of oppression by referring to human trafficking, of which, they suggest, the Baka may be victim (*Vers l'Avenir*, 29/07/2002).

Following the protest and taking issue with the suggestions of confinement, the Belgian anti-racism watchdog launches an enquiry and spends a great deal of attention to matters of mobility.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, the four-page report expresses its profound concern about the freedom of the Baka to move beyond the confines of the park, let alone quit the project (CGCTR, p. 3). This concern, together with the illusory character of the Baka gaining access to the world of people who 'have everything' is ultimately substantiated by manager Louis Raets himself when he declares to the investigators that 'if one would put them [the Baka] in contact with civilisation, they would not want to return back home' (CGCTR, p. 2). Finally, in its end-of-year edition, the newspaper *Vers l'Avenir* (30/12/2002) reviews the Baka affair under the title 'Pygmies in the Yvoiran bush'. Punning on the fact that both Yvoir and Côte d'Ivoire are well-known for their woods, the newspaper highlights the fact that the voyage of the Baka led exactly nowhere and had no outcome other than a temporary relocation of the Baka delegation between the African rainforest and 'The Rainforest' in Belgium.

The above analysis of protest statements and press articles sufficiently illustrates how thoroughly and spectacularly the entire centre-periphery construct erected by The Rainforest is irremediably damaged both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. The question now is what kind of exit option the protestors propose to the Baka: what kind of mobility they suggest the Baka can regain in order to occupy an alternative and more promising 'central' space. In that respect, one needs to distinguish between what the two organisations, MNM and the Collective who subsequently lead the protest, propose. In general, the kind of 'centre' the MNM offers to the Baka is a 'global' space in which all (temporary and permanent) residents in Belgium and Europe (migrants, refugees, etc.) enjoy full citizenship, full political and economic rights as well as protection by universal human rights. In line with this general stance, throughout the controversy, the MNM simply demands the closure of the exhibition and the liberation of the Baka, without ever advising (let alone instructing) them where to move from there. In contrast, the project of the Collective, MNM's successor in the protest, concentrates not so much on who misguided the Baka and why, as on suggesting alternative trajectories.

Let us now turn briefly to the Collective and the spatial dimensions of its actions. In marked contrast to the 'liberators' of the MNM, the Collective presents itself as

<sup>8</sup> Coming into action immediately after the affair broke out in the last week of July, the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (2002) published its report on 1st August.

co-traveller and guide of the Baka wanderers. In a press statement issued on 16th August, the Collective refers back to the success of the heavily mediated meeting of the 10th August in Brussels during which ‘the Baka encountered the African community’; however, it concludes that ‘the upsurge in media attention for the affair must now be supplemented with concrete action’. Most urgently, the Collective proposes to find lodgings for the Baka ‘closer to Brussels’, and to look for alternative venues such as established cultural centres and theatres where the Baka ‘dancers’ can perform. Thus, in line with its Afrocentrist stance, the Collective makes suggestions in the name of African cultural affirmation and solidarity among fellow Africans.

To conclude this multi-sited analysis of the Baka affair, one needs to look at the geographical locations from where the divergent views of the two associations of Belgian Africans are formulated. As said above, the MNM launches its protest from Liège and it does so with a demonstration in front of *the Domaine* and by transmitting a ‘universalist’ message about human rights and citizenship. In its Baka protest as well as in other actions, the MNM is coached by the CIRE, a Liège-based federation of refugee and migrant organisation, which, like the MNM, favours the ‘self-organisation of migrants’ on a basis of ‘intercultural solidarity’.<sup>9</sup> For Joseph Anganda (21/04/2003), the Congolese philosopher who was president of the MNM at the time, his organisation combines what he sees as a local (Liégeois) tradition of left-wing union activism (see [Blommaert and Martiniello, 1996](#)) with the kind of anti-capitalist and Pan-africanist (in the sense of ‘transnational’) struggle in which he has been involved since his youth in Congo/Zaire.

This class-based perspective contrasts heavily to the identity-based stance of the Collective which, from the beginning, firmly identifies itself as a national, if not a transnational (Belgian-Cameroonian), federation operating from Brussels as the capital of Belgium and Europe. When asked about the divergent perspectives of the MNM and the Collective, the latter’s president, Essoh Etia explains in an interview with me (09/01/2003) that it was a deliberate choice to take a point of view other than that of the MNM in order to prevent the Baka affair from being perceived by outsiders as a quarrel among Africans.<sup>10</sup> We will see in the next section, how this concern of the Collective to demonstrate inter-African unity is also expressed at other moments in the controversy.

In sum, from a comparison of the two episodes in the affair, it becomes clear how the division of discursive terrains coincides with a clear division of geographical terrains of action. This becomes most visibly on the day of the first public protest action of the Collective on the 10th August. On that same day the MNM had organised a demonstration in front of the Cameroonian Embassy in Brussels in order to denounce the implication of the Cameroonian and Belgian authorities in the staging

<sup>9</sup> CIRE (Coordination et Initiatives pour Réfugiés et Etrangers) was created in 1995 and expanded considerably in 1998, in the aftermath of the killing of the Nigerian asylum-seeker Semira Adamu by officers of Belgian state police.

<sup>10</sup> ‘The Collective shifted the debate to another terrain (‘nous avons déplacé le débat sur un autre terrain’), Essoh Etia (09/01/2003) explains.

of the exhibition at Yvoir. This demonstration was not a success, partly because several allies of the MNM opted to become member organisations of the Collective which held its meeting in the afternoon. Stated otherwise, on the day the MNM decided to extend its terrain of action to Brussels, that is, to rescale its anti-exhibition protest to a more palpably national and transnational space, the Collective took over the initiative. The single most spectacular thing that happened in the context of that meeting in the centre of Brussels was the transfer of a Baka delegation from Yvoir – another move in a series of attempts to let the Baka explain their cause in front of a heterogeneous public of African associations, journalists and NGO representatives. With this assembly, the ‘movements’, and with it, the ‘politics of space’, did not come to an end. However, it is more difficult to capture these subsequent developments in a ‘multi-sited’ ethnography than in a scale-sensitive one.

### 5. Scales and discursive mobility

A scale-sensitive ethnography of the Baka affair in general and of the Brussels’ meeting, in particular, focuses less on boundaries and transfers between sites of differential status (Yvoir, Liège, Brussels), as it does on singular settings in which different scales are invoked and different spaces are constructed in an attempt to gain agency, identity, and mobility. The different publics that are present in the setting and each of which index large-scale identities and territories, are pivotal elements in a politics of space.

The first public meeting of the Collective for the Defense of the Baka was held in the buildings of the Francophone federation of NGOs, called CNCD (*Centre National de Coopération au Développement*). The meeting attracted a public which can be divided roughly into four groups. (1) The core group of the Collective consisting of its president (Essoh Etia of MUTI), the chairperson of the meeting (Guy Simon Ngakam of LIBERAL), together with a number of related organisations, such as African Axis, Metis-Sages, and Diaspora Camerounaise whose terrain of actions is situated in Africa or the diaspora; (2) a few ‘Belgium-based’ organisations such as the Belgian Humanist Movement, and the above-mentioned NGO federation CNCD; (3) a delegation of three Baka who had come over from Yvoir, consisting of the Baka spokesperson Owono Zé Roger and two representatives of the Baka ‘performers’, the elder couple Raymond Nyate and Melanie Ebata; and (4) a dozen or so journalists of the national and international press, including several TV-channels such as the Francophone public channel RTBf and the international broadcasting corporation RTL.

A scale-sensitive description of the public meeting starts from the idea that these groups or sub-sections thereof constitute the immediate publics which index different spheres or scales. The latter can be discursively mobilised or activated in the course of the meeting. Stated otherwise, within the same space of the meeting, through operations of discursive re-scaling, different spaces are constructed with reference to the diverse publics present in the room.

The meeting’s president Ngakam opens the conference on a strong Afrocentric tone, virtually negating the non-African publics. He explains that in the Baka

exhibition 'human dignity and above all the dignity of the black man' is at stake and that such is particularly painful 'taking into account the Africanity of the notion of dignity'.<sup>11</sup> Ngakam finally explains the public silence of the Baka so far, by stating that the latter honour the African proverb that 'dirty laundry is washed within the family'.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these statements strongly delineate the group of those concerned with the problem of the exhibition, and of those involved in finding a solution as equally 'African'. The same line is adopted by the second speaker at the meeting, the president of the Collective. He goes as far as greeting the Africans as 'brothers and sisters' while identifying the 'whites' in the audience as 'strangers' (as against 'Africans') and 'friends' (as different from 'brothers and sisters').<sup>13</sup>

With the third speaker, the Baka spokesperson Owono Zé, the neatly closed-off group of 'Africans' is gradually opened up in a speech which in its first part closely sticks to the ideas and rhetoric of the Collective, but in its second part and in later interventions evokes new spaces at different scales. This coincides with a shift in address. The orator increasingly addresses the other publics also present at the meeting, that is, the Baka delegation and the international community. One important element which explains the double orientation of the speech is the fact that, most probably, the first section of the speech was written with the assistance of two leading members of the Collective, the night before the meeting. In an interview with me, Essoh Etia (09/01/2003), one of the co-authors of the first part of Owono's speech, describes the second part as 'some personal additions about the political aspects and the marginalisation of the Baka'.

'Dear brothers and sisters, first of all I want to thank you for having found the time to meet us here, even though in Europe, time is precious'. (Owono Zé, 2002)

Thus, Owono Zé opens his speech with a statement which situates the place of the African meeting in a space of diaspora (Africans) and travel (Baka). Owono Zé continues to use this division between two kinds of African travellers during the rest of his speech. In the first part, it serves to distinguish between the Baka as radically deterritorialised travellers and their African 'brothers and sisters' as sufficiently reterritorialised and familiar with the (European) terrain. In the process, Owono Zé subscribes to the general goal of the Collective to lead the Baka out of this wretched natural park at Yvoir, while at the same time he breaks up the African 'we' of the Collective into two groups: 'we', the Baka, and 'you', their African brothers.

<sup>11</sup> The French original of the quoted phrases is: 'la dignité humaine et de l'homme noire en particulier', and 'tenant compte de l'africanité de la notion de dignité'.

<sup>12</sup> In French: 'Le linge sale se lave en famille'.

<sup>13</sup> In retrospect, this is the moment when I decided to further study and write about the Baka affair instead of merely support the affirmative action of the Collective. By then I had come to know Essoh Etia rather well. We were both engaged in creating a new European-African platform of reflection and action, called BECAME. Considering myself as a fellow militant, I attended the meeting of the Collective. When Essoh Etia 'othered' me as a 'white person' in an attempt to give shape and substance to an 'African self', it was as if he created the kind of distance or space which allowed me to reconsider my position and critically reflect on the activism I felt now strangely unfamiliar with.

‘... we did not know the environment (*milieu*) in which we were going to journey [...] we do not master [this] environment...’

‘But, luckily, we have brothers here, you! [...] who understand perfectly [this] environment. [...] You have come to tell us: “[...] it is not here and in that situation they should put you. Leave this place. In this country, there is a better place which corresponds with your dignity and rank’.

The split between the Baka and the (other) Africans, Owono further develops in the second part of his speech, when he begins to formulate his ‘additional topics’. After having established that the Baka delegation at Yvoir must be seen as representing ‘the Baka people’, Owono Zé characterises the Baka as an ‘indigenous’ people along political, economic, and cultural lines. Successively, he draws attention to the political exclusion of the Baka (from all government structures), their economic discrimination (with regard to profits from forest exploitation), and links their overall marginalisation as a minority to their ‘semi-sedentary and even nomadic’ life-style. Rather than use the term ‘indigenous people’ directly, in the above characterisation, Owono Zé calls to mind the principal elements of the standard definition of ‘indigenous people’.<sup>14</sup> In the last sentence of his speech, Owono Zé brings in a final element in this indirect claim of the Baka to the status of ‘indigenous people’ by declaring that the Baka, facing the destruction of their natural environment and their cultural way of life, have already started working together with the NGO *Friends of the Earth*, indeed one important actor in what Hodgson (2002, p. 1040) calls ‘the transnational indigenous rights movement’. In this, the Baka presence in Belgium is presented as a mere extension of this international mobilisation.

Stated in spatial and scale terms, we can see Owono Zé in the course of his speech ‘walking away’ from ‘the Africans’ and into two other spheres: down-scale to the Baka and up-scale to the international community. This tactics by which new social movements of different kinds often make radical attempts to relocate their ‘place-based struggles’ in more global spheres, have been observed by several authors (Adams, 1996; Delaney and Leitner, 1997) but convincingly articulated by Escobar (2001) who, interestingly enough, has recently rephrased his earlier research (Escobar, 1998) on indigenous peoples movements in Colombia in terms of re-scaling, or in his words ‘multi-scale network-oriented subaltern strategies of localisation’ (2001, p. 139). In order to grasp such phenomena of local-global activism, Cox (1998) introduces two terms. On the ‘local’ side Cox (1998, p. 2) situates the ‘space of dependence’ of a movement, defined as ‘the space-specific conditions for [the group’s] material well being and sense of significance’. On the ‘global’ side, new social movements endeavour to construct a ‘space of engagement’, that is, ‘the space in which the politics of securing a space of dependence unfolds’ (idem).

In the useful terms introduced by Cox, Owono simultaneously shapes a ‘space of dependence’ which is that of ‘the Baka’, their natural and cultural environment, and

<sup>14</sup> Although in practice, several African peoples, among which, the Baka ‘Pygmies’ consider themselves as ‘indigenous peoples’ and are recognised as such by many NGOs, the question whether the UN is (or will be) willing to grant them this status is more unsure than ever (Karlsson, 2003) – a situation, the government of Cameroon seems to be capitalising on (Tchoumba, 2002).

a wider, international ‘space of engagement’ consisting of NGOs, the international press, and the transnational community at large. However, this bifurcation into two divergent spaces, to some extent ‘outscales’ the Collective by backgrounding the sphere of ‘Africans’ and ‘Africa’ which it had so compellingly constructed at the beginning of the meeting. This, I argue, opens a struggle over the positioning of the Baka which unfolds in the course of the meeting.<sup>15</sup> In the next phase of the meeting, when the Baka are about to take the floor, this struggle revolves mainly around matters of ‘language’ and above all language competence.

Following the speech of Owono Zé, the president of the Collective announces that the two Baka guests from Yvoir are about to speak. In his introduction, he focuses on the issue of ‘language’.

‘And of course Mr. Zé Owono expressed himself in French because he is a teacher and knows that language / but we also thought that it would be good that the Baka themselves would express themselves in the language which they know best or in which they could communicate best / you can imagine that this will not be in French / so we have involved an interpreter’.<sup>16</sup>

In this statement Owono Zé is dissociated from the ‘the Baka’ in two different ways. Not only is Owono presented as a speaker of French (different from the Baka-speaking Baka) but also and perhaps more importantly, he is discarded as an interpreter from Baka to French. This repositioning of Owono Zé, simultaneously backgrounds the latter’s diversion into alternative scales and reconducts the Baka into the sphere or scale of ‘the Africans’ or ‘Africa’. This re-scaling of the Baka, the Collective performs by presenting itself as the provider of the platform where the Baka are able to express themselves *and* by supplying an interpreter who accomplishes the mediation for the Collective between the Baka and the public at large.

Following this introduction, the position of the Collective as a mediator on behalf of the Baka is further established by problematising the Baka’s *prise de parole* through an interpreter. Some of the material and discursive elements of this are: (a) the interpreter opens by apologising for his limited command of Baka, explaining that he has not spoken Baka for at least a decade; (b) neither the interpreter nor the Baka couple have a microphone at their disposal; (c) the interpreter speaks hesitantly and softly, and sometimes awaits suggestions for translations by people in the audience; (d) silent moments are filled in by the president of the Collective who takes the opportunity to comment on the questions that are asked and, in two instances, fails to give the word back to the Baka or their interpreter.

<sup>15</sup> My use of ‘positioning’ takes its lead from Li (2000, p. 151) who argues that ‘a group’s self-identification as tribal or indigenous [...] is a positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle’.

<sup>16</sup> In French: ‘et évidemment Mr. Zé Owono s’est exprimé en Français parce qu’il est enseignant et il maîtrise cette langue / mais nous avons également pensé qu’il était bon que des Baka eux-mêmes dans la langue qu’il maîtrisent le mieux ou avec laquelle ils peuvent le mieux communiquer puissent également s’exprimer / vous imaginez / ça ne sera pas en Français forcément et donc nous avons adjoint les services d’un traducteur.’

The overall result is that the meeting becomes rowdy and seemingly unorganised. But that does not prevent the Collective from remaining in control of their re-scaling endeavour. In the turmoil, representatives of the Cameroonian Embassy in Brussels begin to contradict what the Baka elder, Raymond Nyate, says about the marginalisation of the Baka in Cameroon. In response to this, the president of the Collective intervenes twice: once by referring again to the ‘dirty laundry’ African proverb and stating that this issue should not be debated in front of the (foreign) press, and once by asking respect for what Nyata tries to explain, stating that ‘In Africa when papa speaks, you do not interrupt’.<sup>17</sup>

Following this discussion, the people of the press decide to leave. At that point the meeting enters into a new phase in which the struggle reaches its apogee. First, there are two rather desperate attempts by the Baka to try to break down the barriers which the Collective is putting up. When Raymond Nyate is (again) asked about the real objective of his group coming to Belgium, the Baka elder does not await the translation and says (or rather shouts) in French ‘We want money, money, money’ (*On veut l’argent, l’argent, l’argent*). This exclamation meets with general embarrassment, not in the least by Owono Zé who takes over and more frankly than before restates the case of the Baka, by invoking, as he has done before, the two spheres: the local one on which the Baka depend for their survival and the global one which they seek to shape in order to find an audience for their demands so as to sustain their territorial, cultural, social and political claims.

After these two interventions, the president of the Collective decides that the Baka have had their say and refocuses attention on the African sphere by making appeals to moral co-responsibility among Africans and its realisation in the future work of the Collective.

## 6. Sites, scales and competencies

The question with which this paper begins is how a space-sensitive sociolinguistics as presented in the position paper of this special issue can be of use to anthropology in general and inform ethnographic descriptions of space and scale politics, in particular. The general answer is that place constructs must be more radically seen as products and processes of social and discursive action grounded in particular material conditions. This outlook is first applied in a multi-sited ethnographic description of the Baka affair by showing how sites, positionings and transfers are constructed and contested by the different actors. This is also the case for the scaling and re-scaling operations that take place during the first public meeting of the Collective and which were analysed in the second part of this paper.

On both the issues of place and scales Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (this issue, p. –) take a radical stance by characterising sites as ‘polycentric’ and as containing ‘multiple centres of indexicality’. My ‘scale-sensitive’ description of the meeting in Brussels takes this as its point of departure and illustrates the argument that ‘spaces

<sup>17</sup> In French: ‘En Afrique, quand le papa parle, tu lui laisse la parole’.

are semiotic sources from which all kinds of indexical meanings can be derived' (ibid., p. –). One of the 'sources' I focus on are the publics, the way they are differentially repartitioned, and come to index different scales of identities and territories.

Directly linked to the kind of 'politics of space' which constitutes the Baka affair is the question of linguistic competencies. In the multi-sited description I picked up phenomena such as the 'silence' of the Baka, the unstable rhetoric of the organisers at Yvoir shifting between the discourses of 'total tourism' and paternalism, as well as the efficacy with which the African associations caught the attention of large-scale publics by launching key-terms like 'human zoo' while activating meanings such as 'colonialism', and 'exploitative confinement'. These observations could lead us to believe that the movements, their directionality (periphery-centre) and their relative success, depend to a large extent on the competencies of the different actors. This, I believe together with Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (this issue), is only partly the case. If we look at the moments in the Baka affair when language competence seems to be at stake, we realise that this competence is as much an attribute of the different actors as it is a capacity constituted by the physical and discursive space or scale under construction. This requires some further explanation.

In several dramatic moments, the struggle over re-scaling during the public meeting of the Collective is largely played out with respect to language competency. Taking the example of translating Baka into French, it appears that several people present at the meeting have a variable command of Baka and French: the Baka couple, the Baka spokesperson, the Collective's interpreter, as well as several people in the audience. However, the enactment of this competence is conditional upon the spaces or scales which it shapes or in which it functions. This is particularly clear, I think, in the episode when the Baka/French competence of Owono Zé is being dispensed with by the Collective in order to re-establish its Afrocentrist re-scaling of the Baka affair. However, I think that such an analysis can also help us to understand the insistence (also, it seems, on the part of Owono Zé) on the fact that the Baka speak Baka.

The insistence of the Collective on the fact that the Baka couple speak in Baka may be understood as part of the general undertaking of the Collective to secure its mediating position by rescaling the Baka as 'Africans'. But also for Owono Zé French-speaking Baka people challenge his re-scaling operations of 'the Baka' as an indigenous people. As much of the literature explains (e.g., Malkki, 1992; Escobar, 1998, 2001; Blommaert, 2002) the status of indigeneity is strongly predicated on a people's 'localisation', its intimate links with its territory and natural habitat, as well as its relative isolation/marginalisation being linked to its cultural and linguistic uniqueness. Moreover, certain cases (Povinelli, 1998) show that within public contexts (e.g., courts) where indigeneity is at stake (or on trial) representatives of indigenous peoples are expected to perform their indigeneity whether in the choice of their language or rhetoric, or in physical appearance. In the case of the public meeting of the Collective and the re-scaling operations of Owono Zé, the 'Baka language' may be seen as a competence – a cultural capital (if ever there was one) – with which the Baka 'space of dependence' is constructed. Therefore, replacing Baka with French might help the Baka in shaping a space of engagement through direct communication, but if speaking French is taken as a sign of their



acculturation, it may destroy the *raison d'être* of the very engagement the Baka are trying to elicit.

## 7. Siting and scaling globalisation, migration and diaspora

The kind of space-oriented ethnography, whether of the multi-sited or the scale-sensitive kind, illustrated above, can be profitably extended, I suggest, to the anthropological study of the dynamics of migration, diaspora and globalisation in general. Again, any understanding in terms of flows (from periphery to centre) or multiscalar repartitions must pay due attention to the discursive operations by which spaces are connected or reconfigured. By extending the productive use of 'indexicality', an alternative analytics of diaspora and globalisation may bring the siting and scaling that occurs in 'glocalities' all over the world, down to their fragmented materiality.

'The invisible organic intellectuals of diasporic communities engage in constant practical ideological work – of marking boundaries, creating transnational networks, articulating dissenting voices, lobbying for local citizenship rights or international human rights – at the same time that they re-inscribe collective memories and utopian visions in their public ceremonials or cultural works'. (Werbner, 2002, p. 11)

Such a view of the fragmented and scalar operations of migrants in the public sphere of their host-countries corresponds with the way in which, for instance, economic and administrative agents have been 'glocalising' Belgium and Brussels. A scale-sensitive study of the economy in Brussels leads Swyngedouw and Baeten (2001, p. 845) to conclude that one is facing:

'a very opaque, contested, and confusing maelstrom of power struggles and rapidly changing choreographies of power conflicts, alliances, and elite configurations'

Specific factors that contribute to such a complex situation are: several decades of institutional reform that have affected all levels of governance in Belgium (villages, linguistic communities, electoral districts, and the federal state), and the growing impact of the European Union. This results in fragmentation where different subnational units (cities, regions, and above all the linguistic communities) constitute diverse but interconnected 'governance-scapes', and, particularly in Brussels (where many of these 'scapes' overlap) in a situation of 'advanced multi-level governance' in which:

'political actors and interest groups in Brussels enjoy the constant incentive to search out and try different levels on which to pursue interests and claims, thus leading to a great deal of cross-level competition.' (Favell and Martiniello, s.d. 8)

If the Baka affair is something to go on, the fragmented and multi-level Belgian governance-scape constitutes a capacity for many a voyager, whether experienced or not.

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